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SUBJECT: GREECE: REACTION TO HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

Ref. A State 21092

SUMMARY  
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1. (SBU) Following the pattern of recent years, the release of the Human Rights Report in Greece was generally reported with straightforward analysis of the issues. For the most part, newspapers avoided the hyperbolic tones that are often the watermark of Greek journalism - especially on any matter that addresses the issue of minority rights in Greece. Following the cues from a press briefing by PolCounselor and HROff, press attention focused on the changes to this year's report, including implementation of Muslim religious law (Sharia) in Thrace. References to minority rights received a great deal of coverage and many publications referred to the differing uses of the word "minority" by the USG and GoG. The issue of journalistic anti-Semitism also figured largely in press reports following the HRR release. End summary.

2. (SBU) On March 6, PolCounselor and HROff met with a select group of Athens-based journalists to discuss the release of the 2006 Human Rights Report (HRR). Drawing on reftel points, Polcounselor discussed the history of the report and explained the Secretary's desire this year to 'defend the defenders of freedom.' Post Press Officer distributed copies of the Ten Core Principles of NGO Protection while HROff highlighted changes in this year's report, including the use of Sharia law in Thrace and its impact on women's rights. HROff also noted two recurring themes: the plight of the Roma community in Greece and the ongoing poor state of detention centers across the country.

3. (SBU) In press reports following the public release of the HRR, center right Kathimerini said that the report, "in substance criticized Greece for tolerating the use of Sharia which contravenes basic women's rights." Virtually all reports noted the first-time appearance of Sharia as an issue addressed in the HRR. (Note: Deputy FM Stilianidis also mentioned it in his March 13 meeting with EUR DAS Bryza, septel. End note.)

4. (U) References to minority rights also received a great deal of press coverage and many publications referred to the differing uses of the word "minority" by the USG and GoG. Several publications commented on the fact that minorities faced problems in connection with the right of self-identification and that they were not allowed to use the term "Turk" or "Turkish." The Pro-PASOK daily TO VIMA added that the USG "continues seeing minorities in Greece" and opined that Embassy officers, including the DCM, believe the Lausanne Treaty should not be viewed as the only Treaty regulating minority rights in Greece. The conservative pro-ruling party (New Democracy) Eleftheros Typos said that the U.S. "position on minorities directly disputes the Lausanne Treaty." This position, the paper said, was also expressed by Ambassador Bond at the OSCE HDIM meeting in Warsaw last year. News reporters found this to be a position that strongly annoyed the GoG. The article concluded that diplomats in Athens saw an effort to encourage revision of the Lausanne Treaty in the report, "causing a shiver among the

diplomatic community."

15. (U) Center-left TA NEA found that the section dealing with the situation in prisons and detention centers was negative for Greece, as it described conditions unfavorably. It admitted, however, that correctional facilities suffered from overcrowding. TA NEA also noted that the report addressed a wide array of issues, including police abuse, minority rights, restrictions on minority self-identification and journalistic anti-Semitism. It also highlighted the fact that there were no allegations that press freedoms were denied or limited in Greece.

16. (U) Pro-government daily Apogevmatini focused on complaints by immigrant organizations regarding the difficulties they face in attaining legal status in Greece. The paper also discussed the self-identification issue of Turks in Thrace. Left-of-center Ethnos saw in the report an indirect criticism of the role of the Greek Orthodox Church, citing references to problems faced by believers in non-Orthodox religions in Greece. Ethnos also said that the USG damned Greece with faint praise by discussing the problems of self-identification for some citizens, poor conditions in detention centers, abuse and mistreatment by the police, and anti-Semitism.

17. (U) Left-of-Center Eleftherotypia's Washington-based correspondent D.P. Dimas noted references to Sharia law and to anti-Semitism in the Greek press as the major differences this year. Dimas also pointed out that the HRR specifically commented on his paper's publication of an anti-Semitic cartoon.

18. (U) Two Patras newspapers expressed satisfaction for the HRR's reference to the problems of the Roma community in Patras, as well as mention of the case of two Patras-based journalists convicted and sentenced to eight months imprisonment for conducting an interview with an Albanian migrant after his arraignment on charges of driving a stolen car. The article concluded that Greece would continue to be criticized as long as it has laws restricting freedom of press in this manner.

COMMENT

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19. (SBU) In the several months preceding release of the HRR, anodyne USG statements on the presence of ethnic minorities within Greece have garnered widespread and sensationalist media coverage. Thus, the manner in which this report was received is a welcome change of tone. However, we expect the minorities issue will continue to be a neuralgic one for the GoG.